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Brian R Naranjo 01/24/2002 04:11:21 PM From DB/Inbox: Brian R Naranjo

Cable Text:UNCLASSIFIED  
TELEGRAM

January 23, 2002

To: SECSTATE WASHDC - ROUTINE  
Action: INR  
From: AMEMBASSY CARACAS (CARACAS 153 - ROUTINE)  
TAGS: ASEC, PREL, POOV, VS  
Captions: SENSITIVE  
Subject: DOUBLE MARCHES SHOW IMPRESSIVE SUPPORT  
Ref: CARACAS 0114

1. (U) SUMMARY: On January 23, a host of opposition parties turned out tens of thousands of people in their most impressive anti-Chavez demonstration to date. Not to be outdone, Chavez's supporters flooded the streets around the National Assembly in a solid show of support. Both sides can legitimately claim a victory. There was no violence. END SUMMARY.

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VETE CHAVEZ YA/VIVA EL PRESIDENTE!  
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2. (U) On January 23, a host of opposition parties and civic groups turned out tens of thousands of people in their most impressive anti-Chavez demonstration to date. The marchers--many from remote corners of the country--were more festive than angry, but their message was clear: Chavez must leave office now. The march, which may have exceeded the attendance goal of 50,000, began at around 10 a.m., with its tail end finally passing the starting point at about 1 p.m. To reduce the risk of violence, march planners prudently chose a route that stayed two blocks away from the pro-Chavez demonstration taking place at the same time.

3. (U) For their part, the Chavistas staged a well-attended march--not large as the opposition's--that flooded the streets around the National Assembly. It was easily as enthusiastic in support of Chavez as the opposition's was against him. Top government officials Jose Vicente Rangel and Aristobulo Isturiz put a positive spin on the peaceful coexistence of two opposite marches as an important demonstration of democratic freedom. But as this cable was being transmitted, Chavez in a public speech at Miraflores palace ridiculed the opposition march and portrayed as cowardice the opposition's decision to avoid a clash.

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THE TWO FACES OF VENEZUELA  
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4. (U) In the main, the anti-Chavez marchers were whiter, less organized, and more well-to-do. The Chavez marchers were more colorful, many wearing the red berets and tee-shirts of the Fifth Republic Movement, or the orange of the pro-Chavez dissident Movement to Socialism party. The Chavez people had more banners; the opposition wittier ones (Liberdad, Si/Cadenas, No.) Both marches were awfully loud, blowing whistles and using noisy sound trucks and megaphones. The opposition marchers favored their trademark pot-banging and other noisemakers; the Chavez people liked firecrackers (which, at one point, caused a scary stampede.) One walked along with the opposition

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marchers; one was swept along with the Chavistas.

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COMMENT: A TACTICAL DRAW  
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5. (SSU) Both sides in this marching exhibition can probably claim a victory. Certainly the opposition proved that even with a limited budget (there were no drinks or toilets provided for their multitudes), it could gather people from all over and stage an impressive and spirit-raising event (raffel). Meanwhile, the ability of Chavez's people to pull together a counter demonstration--doubtlessly aided by government funds--remains formidable. After this display, Chavez can claim, with some justice, that masses of people still back him. The opposition may be taking on Chavez on his own terms, but it hasn't won the battle yet.

Hrinak.

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None

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End Cable Text

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3

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